

Corporate Narrations. An Instrument of Strategic Brand Management

Associate Professor Adela Rogojinaru, PhD
University of Bucharest, Romania
adelarogojinaru@yahoo.com

Abstract. Using textual analysis as a method, our aim is to connect the disciplines of brand management to brand communication via text-based approaches. It has been part of the academic tradition to treat all textual perspectives within the exclusive domain of literary studies. We nevertheless consider that an interdisciplinary recovery of classic text-based methods is fertile in advancing our research methods in branding, especially for teaching purposes at master and doctoral level of the communication disciplines. The methodology is based on the analysis of the use of storytelling in four corporate books on four well-known brands: Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Avon, and Disney.

Keywords: collective memory, branding, strategic communication, brand palimpsest.

1. Brands as narrations

The disciplines of corporate and brand communication have been subject to various considerations by specialists in advertising and brand management. Branding in particular is a peculiar interdisciplinary process and action, which combines marketing, communication, cultural aspects, visual semiotics, and discourse management. Present positions towards brands are subject to various controversies, between apologetic sustenance from advertisers to denigration by anti-global activists or theorists (N. Klein 2000, G. Ritzer 2010). However branding and brands are part of our global identities, incorporating and carrying over times our cultural symbols, our ethos and our epos.

Although the tradition of poetics is part of literary studies, we consider that approaching brands as acts of creative imagination would be fertile in advancing our interpretation of branding. Our premise is that stories incorporate both organizational and individual experiences of members of a particular organizational setting to a degree where that can shape and build a unit of meaning (cf. thoughts about organizational learning in classic works of Peter Senge 1990, some reflections upon organizational dialogue at Argyris & Schon 1978, Browning 1991, Schein

1993, Yanow 1992 or recent posts by Judy Gombita on constructing organisational narratives, 2011).

In his vividly debated book (*Storytelling*, 2008), the French writer and CNRS researcher Christian Salmon referred to “organisation récitante” or storytelling company, suggesting a fictional stance of the contemporary companies. Such way of corporate being is instrumented through subtle methods of corporate propaganda which proved its force in promoting void brands like Enron¹. In this category of corporate discourses, the rhetoric is used to outline brand uniqueness and seduce consumers to adopt branding in their lifestyles. Major scholars of strategic brand management assert that brands’ power resides in the psychic capacity of consumers to recognize and accept brands. Among others, recent brand management proposals such as the CBBE (customer-based brand equity) model clearly indicated that the influence of brands consists in the “differential effect that brand knowledge has on customer response to the marketing of that brand” (Keller 2008: 48). It has been also asserted that a brand should express a duality of “product performance and imagery” (*idem*, p. 77) in order to capture the customer response, therefore we consider that building brands can be similarly viewed as *poiesis* or creation according to the ancient Greek meaning of the word.

In his theoretical position and defence of the rhetorical enactment in public relations, Heath (2001: 41) states that “enactment is meaningful as co-creative narratives” and implies the construction on mutual basis of a common reference for both organisation and publics. Robert L. Heath’s point of view is recovering the logicians’ axioms based on the ancient tradition of Plato and Aristotle dialogic forms of seeking the *truth* in nature and transmitting it through language, plus the construction of these social layers of truth in the community life (reference to Mead or others). This construction and reconstruction of meaning, noted since the ancient philosophy of language, is not different in the nature of brands, which, in fact, as Plato in *Cratylus* would assert, are nothing but arbitrary names of a changing (Heraclitean) reality. Later recovered in modern Logic and Linguistics, by the triangle of *reference*, *referent* and *sense*, the constructed meaning is assumed today as being an arbitrary form of *interpreting* the reality in which we exist.

Brands are not dissimilar to other symbolic forms of expression. To understand their nature, we must inquire if they truly represent an object (or product) therefore a primary

¹ “Void brands” would be those which have no real reference (or real object) so they are false or imaginary. We nevertheless assert that all brands are “imaginative” in a way they can inspire and stimulate our imagination. Cf. the distinction about the “The Imaginative and the Imaginary” in Northrop Frye (1963), *Fables of Identity*.

source of knowledge, or simply connect the names already given to various forms of existence with no clear reference, case in which they will indicate a secondary or an illusory expression of reality. The example of the names given to the first major brands is revelatory. To give a significant case, we shall refer to the notorious Kodak story, a brand simply created by euphonic reasons with reference to the film making or to any imagining product:

The word “Kodak” was first registered as a trademark in 1888. There has been some fanciful speculation, from time to time, on how the name was originated. But the plain truth is that Eastman invented it out of thin air. He explained: “I devised the name myself. The letter ‘K’ had been a favorite with me – it seems a strong, incisive sort of letter. It became a question of trying out a great number of combinations of letters that made words starting and ending with ‘K’. The word ‘Kodak’ is the result”.²

The use of explicit or implicit stories in creating brands has become part of the interpretive treatment of language in advertising. But in most of these narrations that create the collective meaning of the brand, the storyteller was either the brand founder (e.g. George Eastman) or the advertiser, like Oliviero Toscani for *United Colors of Benetton*. The dialogue is initiated and sustained through a channeled discourse, well managed and rigorously protected. We would categorize this in a class of “founding stories” or heroic stories, which are normally part of the brand mythology. Emotional advertising is used for creating the effect upon the consumers who eventually assume brands as part of their experiences. Most of the new rules of the “cutting edge advertising” proposed by Jim Aitchinson ([2003] 2006) would recommend this way of being inspiring by legends that stimulate consumers to go beyond the tangible product reference.

In traditional popular stories that circulate in many variants across territories, the performers would normally create new versions by incorporating the local experiences of their communities. Sometimes brands may incorporate parts of the local stories (like *Dero* of Unilever in Romania)³, or create interactive “status stories” in order to involve customers in personal branding⁴. This second category of brand stories is built on the

² http://www.kodak.com/global/en/corp/historyOfKodak/eastmanTheMan.jhtml?pq-path=2689&pq-locale=en_US, retrieved June, 20, 2011.

³ The 40th anniversary of the DERO brand campaign in 2007 in Romania called upon a common history of the brand and a liberal decade of the communist époque in the years of 1970s, using figures of the pop singers of that period of time.

Cf.

http://www.iqads.ro/a_6878/punct_advertising_si_dero_au_lansat_parfumul_anilor_cei_mai_frumosi.html, retrieved May, 22, 2011.

⁴ *My Kleenex* provides consumers with the possibility of personalized photos that express personal

local histories and creates an identity mechanism through adopting norms and innovation (Rogers 2003).

Common corporate books are celebrating the brand experience and they are created in a *bildungsroman* genre, with the difference that the apprentice or the character who is subject of self-development and formation is the company itself. The interest for the corporate America dates back to the early 20th century along with the classic authors like Theodore Dreiser, whose American projected trilogy was meant to describe the corporate life in America of the beginning of the last century (inspired by the biography of the transportation magnate of Chicago, Charles Tyson Yerkes)⁵. In Dreiser's books, the main character and the corporate facts are also dissimulated (Yerkes is portrayed as the lead character, Frank Cowperwood, although the depicted events were true in the context of the late 19th century America).

We shall examine four books in the category of stories about the intricate culture of corporate brands. One of them was written in 2004 by Constance Hays, a former business reporter of New York Times⁶. The book entitled *The Real Thing. Truth and Power at the Coca-Cola Company* covers the last decades of the company. One may designate this type of stories as companies' monographs, but the way the history of the company is told is more under the form of a narration and not of a factual presentation. The events of the first chapter are placed in 1994, and its title *the Road to Rome* is a multiple reference to Rome, Georgia in US, but symbolically linked to the ancient roads of Rome as well as to the spiritual evolving of the Christian Rome. A short quotation from Hays's book, describing the company's competitor, PepsiCo, is revelatory for her storyteller vocation:

Outside, the morning sun glittered on the streams of water cascading through the fountains that dotted the manicured property in Purchase, New York, that was the PepsiCo corporate headquarters. The copper beeches still fluttered their purplish-black leaves; the maples had turned the color of flame. (p. 186)

Compared to early fiction works on corporate America, like Dreiser's books, Constance Hays's book is fact-based, simpler and less dramatic, scrupulous (and sincere?) in portraying the corporate executives and the inner corporate spirit, as the author announces in the *Preface*:

memorable experiences. cf. <http://trendwatching.com/trends/statusstories.htm>, retrieved May, 16, 2011.

⁵ Two of the three titles were published, namely *The Financier* (1912) and *The Titan* (1914). *The Stoic* was published postmortem in 1947.

⁶ Constance Hays died at the age of 44, cf. the news reported by *The Times* in 2005 <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/07/nyregion/07hays.html>, retrieved May, 25, 2011.

The men running Coca-Cola Company in 1981 recognized Coke's awesome power. But they were sure they could improve it. The first century of Coke had had its high points, but so much had been sloppy, undisciplined, or left top luck – unpredictable forces no one could trust. So they planned a future that they would control from top to bottom, in their company's best interest – a future that would be far different from the reality they knew. (p. xi)

The communication of the brand is embedded in the naturalistic description of the CEOs, so it looks like their characters sustain the brand life and symbolism:

By 1997, the company was divided down the middle between what one former executive called "Georgia old-boy types with Coke in their veins", who saw Coca Cola as infallible, and a younger generation, more skeptical of the marketing messages because events – in politics or elsewhere – had thought them to look beneath the surface of corporate pronouncements. (p. 176)

The story has different layers: at the bottom, the very history of America's corporate life, which is implicit and assumed by the narrator's voice; secondly, the knowledge of the Coca-Cola secular name and fame which is tacitly shared by the narrator and reader helping the story to grow from this complicity in the same way as fiction stories; thirdly, the story as such, viewed by a distant and omniscient witness that celebrates a unique experience of life:

And before long, there was the integration of Coca-Cola and another grate object of the nation's affection: the car. Some people poured Coke onto their windshields to clean them in the rain, insisting that nothing cut through the greasy film of stuff that built up on the glass like good old Coca-Cola. Others used it to clean the interior, scrubbing at stains on the dashboard with a rag dipped in Coca-Cola. The animal kingdom, too, joined the Coca-Cola faithful. Dogs, horses, canaries, elephants, and honeybees were all witnessed drinking Coke. (p. 109)

Ritualistic acts are described and myths around the brand appear due to an enchanted performance of the narrator who forms a gallery of characters of a Balzacian sort:

The Keough people were thought to be ideologically uncluttered when it came to Coca-Cola: They loved the brand and would do anything to protect and perpetuate it. The Doug-ettes, meanwhile, were considered more mercenary. They were the ones who looked out chiefly for the bottom of the line and, the thinking went, spared nothing along the way. (p. 177)

Although the book was thoroughly documented, as Constance Hays states in the last *Acknowledgements*, the story is entirely reconstructed and totally assumed by its narrator, who confesses the heroic regime of the tale: "Dedicated to my husband, John Hays, who is proof that some stories have happy endings. And to all the brave, everywhere" (p. 394). As in old legends, the plot is the revelation of an exceptional course of events. If we think of a deeper symbolism, we can see that, because of the author's death next year after the publication of the book, the brand was somehow

part of her destiny, and this aspect amplifies the dramatic aspect of the story.

The second example is the book dedicated to Disney by James B. Stewart, *Disney War: The Battle for the Magic Kingdom* (2006), himself a journalist of the *Wall Street Journal*, *SmartMoney* and *The New Yorker*, a business columnist at the *New York Times*, and a professor of journalism. Although the brands are different, the public value of Disney story is similar to the previous one on Coca-Cola, namely to penetrate and reveal the obscure sides of the company's and brand's cultures. The author is less inclined to celebrate, but to disclose the internal battles for leadership and power during the Michael Eisner époque at Disney⁷. The use of repeated dialogue lines in the story resembles to a film script (the book starts with a chronological list of the "cast members"), and the style is more journalistic, in the sense that facts are more highlighted and the fictional distortion somehow diminished. On the other hand, the story gains in authenticity, as the narrator no longer assumes the omniscient role of a storyteller, leaving to the characters the full performance on the front stage:

"Give me sixty to ninety days," Katzenberg replied. "It's done."

"It will take years."

"Give me the job of president for two years, and if doesn't work out fire me, Katzberg suggested.

"No."

They were at an impasse. (p.161)

The veracity of the dialogues is attested by the author himself at the end of the book in a *Note on sources*, as well as its sources. To compare the two stories, Hays's and Stewart's, from the point of view of co-creating the organisational sense of the drama, we note that Stewart's dialogic narration is closer to the corporate experience, being less assumed by the narrator and wholly controlled by the corporate performers. With such "écriture", the different layers of the story palimpsest are less detectable. The whole narration is rooted on an intricate family story that goes back to the founder, Walt Disney at the beginning of the 20th century, and continues until the governance of Roy E. Disney, his nephew, who died in 2009, at the age of 79 (three years after the publication of James Stewart's book). Eisner himself had a turbulent personal story and career at Disney, so Stewart's whole narration is also composed of various strata and symbols.

⁷ Michael Eisner was the CEO at Disney Company between 1984 and 2005, and his work was subject to both appreciations and various controversies, cf. Laura Holson, "A Quiet Departure for Eisner at Disney", *New York Times*, 26 September 2005,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/26/business/media/26eisner.html>

Stewart's book presents an additional meta-narrative capacity, which is to disclose the process of writing and the inner conception of the book. In the same *Note on sources*, the author explains the deliberate choice for the genre of narration while disclosing the corporate life:

An advantage of using a narrative approach is that none of the sources are identified. Nearly all the quotes taken directly from my interviews and attributed to the speaker are from Eisner. Otherwise, to identify some sources and not others would simply invite speculation, by process of elimination, about who was or wasn't a source. (p. 545)

A particular value is attributed by the author to the use of dialogues which are given a particular narrative value and proves the existence of "narratological conscience" beyond Stewart's statements:

As part of the narrative, I have included passages of dialogue. Dialogue – what words were said – is a fact like any other. It is not necessarily a quotation from an interview with me and I would discourage readers from inferring that one or both of the direct speakers is a direct source. (ibid.)

Describing the dialogue "a fact like any other" would lead to admitting that dialogues have indeed a narrative function, in spite of the fact that the author is not concerned with any specific terminology. The dialogical nature of Stewart's book confers a particular value to the corporate epos.

The third example (*Avon: Building the World's Premier Company for Women*) is a volume dedicated to AVON, a company of cosmetic and beauty products. The book is written by Laura Klepacki and published in 2005. The book is stylistically negligible, with a low degree of performativity⁸. Of all the cases we have examined, this is a true marketing book by purpose and writing style, with no specific literary or discourse value. It is factual in presenting the brand, politically correct in describing the corporate acts, with correct but superficial understanding of the cultural features:

The scientific arm of Avon's product development machine has been centered at the same Suffern, New York, site since 1895, beginning with a makeshift lab. The process is like a spinning top that may wind down at times but never slows enough to tip. Avon invents at least 1.000 new beauty products every year. It is an astounding number that far outpaces the productivity at any other beauty company. (p. 102).

No matter how paradoxical it may seem, the Avon history is not told in a story format, but in that of a large corporate brochure. The characters' performance is dull, and the

⁸ The terms *performative* and *performativity* related to language recalls of John L. Austin's book, *How to do Things with Words* (1962).

acting is false. Despite the notoriety of the brand, the propagandistic tune of the book makes it doubtful and tedious:

Whether it is someone from marketing or product development, part of the job is to go out and scour every corner of society to find where new ideas are emerging. Anything can lead to a new beauty concept, be it a nightclub fashion trend that needs a matching nail color or a popular food ingredient that can be used as a star scent for a new lip gloss. (p.110)

We are particularly stunned by the fact that a book with an obvious advertising purpose is so little concerned about readership, except perhaps the group of stakeholders. The brand presentation is shallow, and the palimpsest is void: no layers for the symbolic construction, no myths to be born. As we will show in our analysis, common marketing instruments are often inadequate for an effective strategic brand communication.

There are other cases in which brands became experiential in the true sense of inspiring or being at the bottom of personal career and projects. This is the case of our fourth example. Aviad Meitar, the former Chairman of Quadrant Amorq Bottling Company Limited (QABCL), that was the exclusive PepsiCo licensee for Romania in the early 1990s, published a rather surprising book about his personal experience in Romania under the title: *An Unimaginable Journey. How Pepsi Beat the Odds in Romania* (2009).⁹

The author of the book had no wish to celebrate the brand in itself as the book is not a branding exercise per se, but he uses comparisons and a moralistic style to portray the arrival of Pepsi in Romania of the '90s similar to the Viking spirit of conquest:

One thousand years ago, Nordic seamen roamed the oceans in their longboats, conquering nations and launching Pepsi franchises wherever they went. Not really. But on a recent trip to Scandinavia, I became fascinated with Viking culture and discovered our Pepsi team had a lot in common with those long-ago sailing man bravely exploring uncharted waters. (p. 35)

Far from being a corporate message, Aviad Meitar's, dedicated to Pepsi, Coke's competitor, is also depicting local characters much more than looking at the driving forces of the market in the Eastern Europe. The book on Pepsi is no longer written in the naturalistic epos of the corporate novels in Dreiser's tradition, but rather in the European style of memorialistic literature, a first person narrative that seems to totally assume the Pepsi brand as far as its Romanian adventure was concerned. The history is more romanticized, with nostalgic and idealistic views of the author, who is both the narrator and the main character of the book. Events of the author's

⁹ More evidence on the author and his book at <http://www.authorsden.com/aviadmeitar>. The presence of Quadrant Amorq Bottling in the early 1990s is briefly reported on the official website of PepsiCo Romania, <http://www.pepsico.ro/>, retrieved May, 05, 2011.

personal life are mixed with the actual experience of the brand.

After the mourning period, I needed to visit the operation in Romania, so my wife, Ravit, came along. It was her first visit to the country, some eighteen months after the inaugural trip, and I was eager to view Romania through her fresh eyes. Our trip allowed me to gain some perspective on all of the development the country had seen in a year and a half. I appreciated the opportunity to mentally review our progress while I showed Ravit around. (p. 59)

Since there are many such passages in the book, it seems an autobiography, written with a good sense of *memory*, *narrative* and *identity*. The book tells more about Aviad Meitar beating the odds than about Pepsi, however the emotional effect of the story and the feeling that we have witnessed a human sacrifice to the brand's deities revives its myth. The last discussion of the author with his oldest son on the topic of passing the Pepsi operation to another bottler is depicted as a parable:

"Daddy," he said through his tears, "all these years you have repeated the story that on January 1992 two children were born to you: the Pepsi business on the sixth and me on the seventh. Now that the business is being sold, what does that mean about my identity?" (p. 163)

It is quite unusual for a book that is dedicated to a brand to be an autobiography of the author. The text becomes entirely parabolic and its intertextuality serves to construct a completely different brand of Pepsi than the one everybody knows. Compared to the previous corporate books, notably those of Hays and Stewart, Aviad Meitar's story has nothing in common with tales of corporate heroism. On the contrary, there are figures of humility and modesty throughout the odyssey of the QABCL that symbolically expresses the virtues of those who bring the brand to the unknown land of Romania.

2. Fiction, vernacular memory and rhetoric in brand communication

Most critics would not recognize the corporate books as literary and the notoriety of such products will remain in the area of corporate public relations. The corporate books contain nonetheless different strata of the brand palimpsest and there are artefacts of the popular culture around the brand. It is our intention to question the nature of these texts and explain whether they should be considered minor pieces of literature, elements of the biography of the respective writers, or instruments of brand communication.

Brand strategists, such as Kevin L. Keller (2008) would be in favor of admitting that all stories are part of brand capital as long as they represent the customers' response. Indeed brand marketing strategists aim to capitalize the consumers' values in the reputation and

culture of the brand. If we examine the official website¹⁰ of the Coca Cola company, we note that “status stories” on Coca-Cola and Coke are being classified on categories of topics or genre (romance, military, times with friends, Coca-Cola employees, etc.). There is an attempt to cover all textual genres and all predictable experiences. There is however no trace of Hays’ book at the official Coca Cola site and we could not detect clear results elsewhere. Following the trace of Hays’ book on the internet, we found that Hays’ book is indeed read and recommended, but no apparent attachment to the brand results, which would have readers of this book.¹¹ There are some professional reviews such as the one in *the Guardian*¹², but little interest is placed on the relationship between the brand and its publics. In case of Aviad Meitar’s book, the lack of public appearance of PepsiCo at the launching event of the book on the 11th of March 2010 in Bucharest is inexplicable in the normal context of branding in which all events should be capitalized in the best possible way.¹³ The company PepsiCo Romania does not assume in its official website any of the events related in the book, although the presence of Quadrant Amorq Bottling is briefly noted as part of the post-communist history of Pepsi in Romania.

This state of affairs shows a marginal position and low recognition of other stories than those told or invited by the companies themselves. Although research for the books is largely made with the help of insiders, we can assert that corporate stories are created outside the corporate communities, within the public area, and have made use of collective narrative patterns of a given society.

Let us examine the three possible phases of the corporate representation: the fictional state, the “collective memory” state, and the corporate rhetoric state. Fiction refers to considerations of some attributes, such as *mimesis*, or representation of reality, *imaginary*, which is the sublimation of desire, rather than the truth, and in late modernity, questioning *personal authenticity*. The question that prevails is what kind of fiction we witness in these cases: could we refer to “documentary fiction” or to “historical fiction”? In any case, the representational state is questionable because it is

¹⁰ <http://www.thecoca-colacompany.com/heritage/stories/index.html>, retrieved May, 25, 2011.

¹¹ 79 reviews, ratings and comments are on display at

http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/203590.The_Real_Thing (retrieved August, 30, 2011). None of the readers express the idea of consuming the product or valuing the brand. Most of the respondents are commenting on the plot and on the story as a whole, which brings us to the idea that Hays’s book was never used by the brand to target the key publics. The commentaries are modest or reserved. “No great insights”, concludes one of the reviewers in August 2011.

¹² Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/mar/27/featuresreviews.guardianreview6..>, retrieved June, 14, 2010.

¹³ For reference to the launching event, see <http://www.romania-insider.com/aviad-meitar-for-the-ny-times-taking-the-pepsi-franchise-into-an-ice-cold-romania/12851/>, retrieved June, 16, 2011.

not the authors who introduce themselves as narrators of the story. The highest rank is held by the book on Pepsi, since the author has used a first-person narrative. The lowest is held by the Avon book, whose author reports, without narrating. The fictional state is better sustained by authors like Stewart in his meta-narrative afterword, who indicates his use of imagination in combining and using the sources. In terms of personal authenticity, all narrators, being the 1st or the 3rd person, are distorted by and distort reality.

The aspect of collective memory being involved in the memorization and public capitalization of brands is particularly important. The community memory serves as both alibi for the brand innocence and supports for writing the brand palimpsest. It acts therefore as an “embedded memory”, in which memory and the logic performance of the action is integrated.¹⁴ Although the attributes of embedding do not appear in references to social studies (that use attributes such as “collective”, “public” or “cultural”), social memory often operates as a “vernacular” memory¹⁵, being led by narrative patterns around *identity* and *ethnicity*, and its effect on the group behavior appears in various collective rituals (like anniversaries or commemorations) and also in ethnic conflicts. In their paper “Social Memory, Evidence, and Conflict”, Anderlini et al. (2009) argue that an incorrect vicarious memory of a given society is the key for creating and perpetuating destructive ethnic conflicts, and they demonstrate their premise through the application of game theory. If the ritualization of the brand occurs in the same way as the ritualization of collective past events, we can conclude that some sort of vernacular or public memory is being used for the celebration of brands in the same way that communities celebrate their ancestors or their national heroes.

In terms of rhetoric as the source and scope of narration are concerned, we tried to apply the rhetorical enactment theory to the corporate discourse of the four books on Coca Cola, Pepsi, Avon or Disney, following Heath’s proposal in the second chapter of *the Handbook of Public Relations* (2001). The question that may be raised refers to what extent we can conclude that a co-creation of meaning is applied. A rhetorical enactment

¹⁴ The term of “embedded memory” is used in the computing sciences for defining complex operating systems that perform autonomously single integrated functions. Cf. Karcher et al. *Memory 1997*, Integrated Circuit Engineering Corporation <http://smithsonianchips.si.edu/ice/cd/MEMORY97/SEC11.PDF>, retrieved June, 11, 2011.

¹⁵ Cf. Bodnar, John (1992). *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. Cf. commentaries to Bodnar’s work at Tinker, G. (2005). *Key Concepts in European Modern History. Constructing Public Memory: Problems with the Bodnar Thesis*, <http://www.gregtinker.co.uk/documents/Greg%20Tinker%20-%20Constructing%20Public%20Memory.pdf>, retrieved June, 25, 2011.

is present, thus can we say that a dialogic approach is part of the relationships that these various brands are building with their key publics? The stories are indeed subject of an inquiry and often the interaction between two or more players. Like in the Shakespearean theatre, the drama is organized around an absent character, which is the brand, always invoked, but not performing.

Current business would engage in the application of rhetoric for their publicity, public relations or branding in order to generate and maintain the active dialogue with its stakeholders or publics. In the cases that we have previously analyzed, the dialogues embrace two forms of expression: the *literary* expression, which is the use of dialogues within the narratives, as a particular mode or regime of the epos, and the *communicative* form, which will be shaped in transactions of meaning between actors through conversational implicatures.¹⁶ In this respect, it is indeed astonishing that all corporate books have been characterized by large parts of dialogues reproducing discussions at the management level. Although the dialogue is not directly engaging external publics, it could be the intention of the narrators, as it happens in the modern novels, to help the reader to identify him/herself with any of the outlined characters. In his analysis of the identification process of contemporary readers with media characters, Cohen (2001) specifies the distinction between what we may call personality identification and the *communicative identification*:

Unlike identification with parents, leaders, or nations, identification with media characters is a result of a carefully constructed situation. Thus, media studies of identification must account for the production of identification targets as well as the identification of audiences with them. Finally, it is important to note that identification is a response to communication by others that is marked by internalizing a point of view rather than a process of projecting one's own identity onto someone or something else. (Cohen 2001: 251)

Communicative identification would therefore serve to emphasize the persuasion function of the language. Unlike fictional books, the corporate work as media for conveying specific public messages, it should be seen as a product of technologically and socially embedded strategies of readers' political socialization. In his arguments, Cohen (2001: 258) shows that narrative media genres are more likely to stimulate the identification processes than other audio-visual genres. We therefore conclude that dialogues do not have an informative function, but a representational and an emphatic one, which serves to anchor the brand in the public memory. Linguistically, most of these dialogues contain implicatures on power relations (similar to the language of

¹⁶ Cf. Pragmatic points on Grice's conversational implicatures in Levinson, S. (2000). *Presumptive Meanings. The Theory of Generalized Conversational Implicature*. Cambridge: MIT.

politics), through which the audience will infer meanings on subjects that are not depicted by the narrator.

One of the best theories that might explain the use of the language in corporate books is developed in John R. Searle's book, *The Construction of Social Reality* ([1995] 2000). The theory is meant to explain the social construction of institutional facts by *collective intentionality*, through utterances that have an *agentive function* for assigning a status to the objects or facts, and discursive facts obey to *constitutive rules* to make that status to perform a defined function (in the form that "X counts as Y in C"). As Searle ([1995] 2000: 31) states, "within the category of agentive functions is a special category of those entities whose agentive function is to *symbolize, to represent, to stand for* – or, in general – *to mean* something or other".¹⁷ The large use of performative utterances determines a certain obscurity of the entire communication, because this kind of utterances cannot be treated as true or false (a thesis that goes back to Austin, 1962). Moreover, compared to "constative" utterances and acts, performatives represent a language of authority and the expression of intrinsic power. Following this Austin/Searle line of logic, we say that corporate books corrupt the real world of the company and establish a different one, through a series of "parasitic" acts with the illocutionary force that institutionalizes the respective brand.

We can reassert that the use of performatives, which is unusual in fictional texts, offers the corporate story authenticity and the necessary credibility in relation to the brand's publics. In this regard, we have to add that the text remains ambiguous as its readership and the delineation between readers, stakeholders and any publics are concerned. As previously explained, the corporate text should be treated as a medium of public communication, therefore it is a blurred line between its heuristic function and the persuasive one.

3. Corporate books and strategic communication. Concluding remarks

In this analysis, we aimed to confirm the premise that corporate books are indeed instruments of (brand) strategic communication and their instrumentalisation is made through the particular use of their hybrid genre, which is situated between literature, history, journalism and marketing. We examined four books of different brands, authors and styles of writing, with the intention to analyze their poetic status and to conclude upon their communicative function. All the items were published in the late decade,

¹⁷ Although we consulted the Romanian translation and the page indicated is from this source, the quotation respects the English version from 1995, published by Free Press, NY.

which makes us believe that it is a recent phenomenon, perhaps encouraged by the turbulent life of business in the last years. Their marketing function is obvious although not declared by any of the involved parts, being either the author or the company executives. They have all been ambitious projects, that required documentation and time for gathering data and facts from direct research.

There are many formal contradictions that mark these products, which we consider relevant:

a) *the obscure readership*: the books were intended for the large market, but their circulation remains limited to a sphere of “connoisseurs” or to the erratic comments on the web.

b) *the hidden corporate authorship*: all authors assume their texts and subjects entirely despite the fact that all stories are previously owned by different owners, notably the described companies. For some of them (C. Hays, J. Stewart), it was a matter of business expertise, for others (A. Meitar), a personal and professional accomplishment. In the case of L. Klepacki, it seems a personal project. In spite of these clear commitments, the books are characterized by a double intellectual ownership, of the author and of the CEOs involved.

c) *the feeble structure of the plot and characters*: the stories depict real sequences of the corporate life and follow closely the historical facts as they are. However other interviewed persons, except the prominent figures in the management, are not included in the “gallery” of portraits, and this aspect leads us to doubt the veracity of certain facts.

In addition, there are inner textual contradictions related to the use of language and of the particular “écriture” or writing style, to the regime of the story – fictional or non-fictional, to the authenticity of characters’ dialogues in relation to an omniscient narrator, etc. In front of an object so contradictory, and despite the mediocre value of certain types, the research method is not evident to the critic. Narratives are rarely used in public relations or publicity to examine the corporate discourse, with some exceptions consisting in the examination of corporate official texts such as success stories or “status stories”. The fact that narratology should be viewed independently from literary criticism is accepted.¹⁸ Nevertheless, apart from accepting the rhetoric and argumentative methods to describe the dialogic dimension of public communication, the sources rooted in linguistics or in the philosophy of language remain unexplored.

¹⁸ Cf. Meister, J.C., Kindt, T., Schemus, W. (2005). *Narratology beyond Literary Criticism: Mediality, Disciplinarity*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

In support of the argumentation of expanding the interdisciplinary boundaries of the methodologies, Ihlen et al. (2009: 3) strengthen the view on major social theories being used in public relations:

It is obvious that public relations theory can be and, in fact, is rooted in a number of disciplinary fields, such as mass communication, interpersonal/speech communication, (social) psychology, economics, and sociology, and in different schools of thought, such as functionalism, constructivism, feminism, Marxism, or cultural theories.

Their interpretation of public relations fundamentals based on authors, such as Bourdieu, Foulcault, Habermas, Latour and others, builds a solid perspective on the critical reviews of this discipline. Ihlen, van Ruler, and Fredrikson's volume should be seen in continuation of many other scholars providing theoretical inputs in collective studies or independently. The interdisciplinary approaches are therefore encouraged and we see more epistemological concerns about the object and the methodology of public relations and strategic communication.

Social theories are optimal for the cross-fertilization of the organizational disciplines and studies; however the communicative approaches require an even greater variety of interpretive methods. There are communicative objects whose representational function remains marginal such as the corporate books. We have used a method that connects social and cultural anthropology, narratology, socio-linguistic, and pragmatics of language. Although we are aware of the incompleteness of our analysis, a single method would have been even more deficient in explaining the status of these books. The fact that they are treated as objects of mass entertainment and they are not ranked high in the editorial market might be indeed a sign of their mediocre brand positioning so far. In many ways, they are artefacts of popular culture; therefore new theoretical insights could be relevant for this aspect as well.

References

- Aitchinson, Jim ([2003] 2006). *Inovație în advertising [Cutting Edge of Advertising II]*. București: Brandbuilders.
- Anderlini Luca, Gerardi Dino, Lagunoff Roger (2009). *Social Memory, Evidence, and Conflict*. Retrieved from <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/lagunoff/Memory.pdf> , accessed June, 20, 2011.
- Argyris, C., Schön, D.A. (1978). *Organizational Learning: A Theory in Action Perspective*. Reading: Addison-Wesley.
- Austin, John L. (1962). *How to Do Things with Words*. London: Oxford University Press.

Barthes, Roland (1987). *Romanul scriiturii. Antologie*. București: Editura Univers. This is a collection of Roland Barthes's texts, selected and translated by Adriana Babeți and Delia Șepețean-Vasilu.

Baudrillard, Jean ([1970] 2005), *Societatea de consum* [La Société de Consommation]. București: comunicare.ro.

Bodnar, John (1992). *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1986). *Economia bunurilor simbolice*. București: Editura Meridiane. This is a collection of Pierre Bourdieu's texts, selected and translated by Mihai Dinu Gheorghiu.

Bauman, Zygmunt (2007). *Consuming Life*. Cambridge: Polity.

Browning, Larry D. (1991). "Organizational narratives and organizational structure". [In:] *Journal of Organizational Change Management*. Vol. 4 (3), 59 – 67.

Castells, Manuel (2010). *The Power of Identity*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.

Cohen, Jonathan (2001). "Defining identification: a theoretical look at the identification of audiences with media characters". [In:] *Mass Communication & Society*. 4(3), pp. 245–264. Retrieved from <http://hevra.haifa.ac.il/~comm/he/files/yon/ident.pdf>, July, 15, 2010.

Connor, Steven ([1989] 1999). *Cultura postmodernă* [Postmodernist Culture. An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary]. București: Meridiane.

Cottle, Simon (2003). *News, Public Relations and Power*. London: Sage Publications.

Gombita, Judy (2011). *Constructing the Organizational Narrative: PR Definition in the Making*. Retrieved from <http://www.prconversations.com/index.php/2011/08/constructing-the-organizational-narrative-pr-definition-in-the-making/>, June, 16, 2011.

Greimas, Algirdas J., Fontanille, Jacques ([1991] 1997). *Semiotica pasiunilor. De la stările lucrurilor la stările sufletului* [La sémiotique des passions. Des états de choses aux états d'âme]. București: Scripta.

Hays, Constance L. (2004). *The Real Thing. Truth and Power at the Coca-Cola Company*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks.

Heath, Robert L. (ed.) (2001). *Handbook of Public Relations*. London, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Huizinga, Johan ([1938] 1998). *Homo ludens* [Homo Ludens]. București: Humanitas.

Ihlen, Øyvind, van Ruler, Betteke, Fredrikson, Magnus (2009). *Public Relations and Social Theory. Key Figures and Concepts*. New York: Routledge.

Keller, Kevin L. (2008). *Strategic Brand Management*. NJ: Pearson Education International.

Klein, Naomi (2000). *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*. Toronto: Random House of Canada.

Klepacki, Laura ([2005] 2006). *AVON. Cum a fost construită la nivel mondial Compania pentru femei*. [Avon. Building the World's Premier Company for Women]. București: Brandbuilders Grup.

Levinson, Stephen C. (2000). *Presumptive Meanings. The Theory of Generalized Conversational Implicature*. Cambridge: MIT.

- Meitar, Aviad (2009). *An Unimaginable Journey. How Pepsi Beat the Odds in Romania*. Charleston: BookSurge Publishing.
- Nash, Christopher (1990). *Narrative in Cultures. The Uses of Storytelling in the Sciences, Philosophy, and Literature*. London: Routledge.
- Ricoeur, Paul ([1975] 1984). *Metafora vie [La métaphore vive]*. București: Editura Univers.
- Rogers, Everett (2003). *Diffusion of Innovation*. New York: Free Press.
- Ritzer, George ([2003] 2010). *Globalizarea nimicului. Cultura consumului și paradoxurile abundenței [The Globalization of Nothing 2]*. București: Humanitas.
- Salmon, Christian (2008). *Storytelling, la machine à fabriquer des histoires et à formater les esprits*. Paris : La Découverte.
- Schein, Edgar H. (1993). *On Dialogue, Culture, and Organizational Learning*. Retrieved from http://skat.ihmc.us/rid=1224331576109_874999272_13863/Schein_On%20Dialogue%20Culture%20and%20Org%20Learning.pdf, June, 21, 2010.
- Searle, John R. ([1995] 2000). *Realitatea ca proiect social. [The Construction of Social Reality]*. Iași: Polirom.
- Stewart, James B. (2006). *Disney War. The Battle for the Magic Kingdom*. London: Pocket Books.
- Yanow, D. (1992). *The Languages of 'Organizational Learning': A Palimpsest of Terms*. Retrieved from [http://ktru-main.lancs.ac.uk/pub/ol3.nsf/0/2bdf3ca8437a3e1380256770003264f9/\\$FILE/Yanow.pdf](http://ktru-main.lancs.ac.uk/pub/ol3.nsf/0/2bdf3ca8437a3e1380256770003264f9/$FILE/Yanow.pdf), July, 04, 2011.
- Yanow, Dvora, Ybema, Sierk, van Hulst, Merlijn (2011). *Practicing Organizational Ethnography*. Retrieved from http://uva.academia.edu/DvoraYanow/Papers/333887/Practicing_Organizational_Ethnography, June, 25, 2011.